

The Native Lens: Barry Lopez's Archaic Relation to the Environment in "Nature: The Language of Animals"

Seeking enlightenment in the natural world, Barry Lopez envelopes both his physical and transcendent self into the west slope of the North Cascades in the Pacific Northwest state of Oregon. The land tells a story of the early Native American inhabitants that used the mountain as a route for trade with other tribes, and its every feature signifies the landscapes ever-changing qualities. Barry Lopez seeks something incredibly vital in the landscape, and knows that humans must find an intimacy with a landscape in order to fully find their mind and bodies immersed wholly within it. Barry Lopez looks at this natural realm through a native lens, meaning he looks at the world from a lens of its past inhabitants and uses that understanding to form a relationship with the present. Lopez's archaic relation to nature is experienced through a deep recognition and respect for the land's wildlife; however, he poses a problem that Western civilization has with integrating themselves in the natural world. Humans should not attempt to "redefine human community" in search of an environmental understanding, but should rather reintegrate themselves with the land's past in order to hear, see, and experience all that a geographic place has to offer.

According to Barry Lopez, there are two ways to "learn" the land—"enter it repeatedly and attentively on your own or give your attention to its occupants"(Lopez, "The Language of Animals"). Both are valid and practical ways to discover what a geographical place has to offer. Entering a place "repeatedly and attentively on your own" advocates for creating a relationship with a place in

solitude and deep meditation. However, the key element to understanding a place—according to Lopez—is giving your “attention to its occupants”(Lopez, “Animals”). When one can fully understand those entities that inhabited a place in the past, one can immerse themselves in what the land had to offer, has to offer, and will have to offer. Before the 1840s, the Tsanchifin Kalapuya Indians camped in the mountains which Lopez now wanders amongst. He speculates that the native peoples “have left scant trace of their comings and goings”(Lopez, “Animals) in the McKenzie River Valley. Their presence is known, but Lopez does not dwell on those humans of the past to understand the land of the present, but he rather is interested in the animals that roam the valley.

Humans have certainly evolved from those beings of the past; however, animals “can convey meaning, and offer an attentive human being illumination”(Lopez, “Animals”). These are the most “trustworthy occupants” and they are the key to understanding a geographical place. The environment is constantly changing, but is always a direct product of those that interact with it. There is a clear material crisis in the relationship between nature and humanity, but the world continues to change as it becomes further subject to the manipulative hands of man. Humankind consistently tries to understand the environment by redefining human community and culture, but these living animals (relics of the land) tell the past better than any human can. To have a whole relationship to nature—an emotional connection to existence—one must appreciate these past entities.

Like Thoreau, Lopez fears that humans are relying too heavily on technology and the industrial world. As the industrial world barrels through the natural biosphere, humans often become stuck to it. In the “wake of industrialization, colonialism, and, more recently, the forcing power of capitalism”(Lopez, “Animals”), humans attempt to “redefine human community”(Lopez, “Animals”). Humans are ignorant of the past because the present is so imposing. The industrial world does not stop for the well being of the environment, and humans often neglect it as well. Nature cannot be left to fade away into simply existing, but must be examined. When humans define nature as simply “scenery”(Lopez, “Animals”), they cut themselves “off from something vital”(Lopez, “Animals”), and something that is imperative to the existence of the world.

In looking through a native lens, or viewing nature with deep consideration for the past beings that inhabited it, the natural world develops into something greater. Nature is understood by the histories it has experienced. James Perrin Warren states in his book, *Other Country*, that Lopez has a deep dedication to the histories of the environment. In the book, Warren quotes a question from Lopez: “What might we gain as a people if we were to reimagine what was, at one point, too vast either to imagine or render?”¹ This question begs an answer that is aligned with this understanding of nature with deep consideration for the past. The histories of the world give individuals the ability

¹ Warren, James Perrin. “Learning to See: Barry Lopez and Robert Adams.” *Other Country: Barry Lopez and the Community of Artists*, University of Arizona Press, 2015, pp. 19–34, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pd5w.7.

to tie themselves to something far greater than what presents itself of the surface. Humans can watch a “mule deer stot across a river bar, a sharp-shinned hawk maneuver in dense timber, [or] a female Chinook build her nest on clean gravel”(Lopez, “Animals”), and recall where they learned those life-dependent skills. Their every action is a movement that they have learned from their past animal ancestors, and individuals constantly gain insight by observing them.

Humans often find themselves “turning nature into scenery and commodities”(Lopez, “Animals”) as they are attached to the world culture on a industrial and economic level. When approaching nature in a discombobulated industrial frenzy, the environment takes on a rather superficial appearance. The “modern plagues”—loss of biodiversity, global warming, and the individual quest for material wealth”(Lopez, “Animals”) all combine to produce this shallow ecological understanding. The environment opens up to provide divine knowledge in almost every way, but it depends on the human perspective to convey a special message. Like Thoreau and the railroad, Lopez and his speculation about industrialization break down how the natural world falls apart at the hands of these imposing forces. It is necessary for individuals to reintegrate themselves in specific geographic places, and strip themselves of industrial and economic ties to that place. This will produce a greater understanding of the environment, but more importantly a greater appreciation for the land’s histories.

A profound consideration for the past and the land's histories is imperative to understanding the land as it exists in the present. Lopez looks for integration into the environment through its past inhabitants, specifically animals. These animals are the most "animated part of a landscape"(Lopez, "Animals"). The most conclusion that Lopez makes that ties to the rest of his work is that our "routine exchanges with [animals] are most often simply a reaffirmation that we're alive in a particular place together at a particular time"(Lopez, "Animals"). The community of a place defines that culture and that geographic place. The animals that roam the land tell a boundless history of a geographic place, and give humans the ability to make a place their own. We are all alive in a specific place at a particular time, and examining the past helps us to understand that.

Individuals should not attempt to "redefine human community" in search of finding a deep connection to the natural world, as this process only turns the geographic place into something it is not. When we label a human community as a product of the industrial and economic world, we strip its inhabitants of the true environmental value. It is imperative that we "give [our] attention to its occupants", specifically those living entities that experience the natural world fully. These animals tell tales of the past in their processes, every movement and appearance. The past defines a geographic place in the present, and only a deep respect for the historical can produce a great understanding of the natural world as it manifests itself in the present.

